DOCUMENT RESUME

AL 001 423

ED 022 157

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LANGUAGE AND COGNITIVE ASSESSMENT OF NEGRO CHILDREN; ASSUMPTIONS AND RESEARCH NEEDS.

Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
Pub Date 68
Note-15p.; Speech delivered at Meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, 1968.
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.68
Descriptors-AUDITORY DISCRIMINATION, BEHAVIOR THEORIES, COGNITIVE ABILITY, COGNITIVE MEASUREMENT, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES, CULTURAL FACTORS, GENETICS, LANGUAGE RESEARCH, MIDDLE CLASS NORM, NEGRO CULTURE, *NEGRO DIALECTS, NEGRO MOTHERS, NEGRO STEREOTYPES, *NEGRO YOUTH, NONSTANDARD DIALECTS, PSYCHOLINGUISTICS, PSYCHOLOGY, SOCIALLY DEVIANT BEHAVIOR, *SOCIOLINGUISTICS, VERBAL DEVELOPMENT

This paper focuses attention on the kinds of research assumptions that are present in the literature on language, and which can be found in the "myths" about family structure and motivation. Three major professions are concerned with describing the language and cognitive abilities of black children--(1) educators, who believe these children to be "virtually verbally destitute," (2) psychologists, who have "reconfirmed" initially that either these children don't talk, or, if they do, their speech is a "deterrent to cognitive growth," and (3) linguists, who have examined the language and found it a "well-ordered, highly structured, highly developed language system which in many aspects is different from standard English." The kind of responses that black children make in auditory discrimination tests are based on the sound usage they have learned in their environment, and do not reflect difficulty in discriminating. Because their syntax also differs from standard English, the psychologist, not aware of the rules of Negro nonstandard, has interpreted these differences not as the result of well-learned rules, but as evidence of "linguistic underdevelopment." The psychologist must learn to distinguish between the questions (1) Has this child acquired language? and (2) Has this child acquired competence in standard English? A reference list of recent works in linguistics and Negro studies is appended. (AMM)

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Language and Cognitive Assessment of Negro Children

Assumptions and Research Needs

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American Psychological Association, San Francisco, 1968

The view of the black man as inherently inferior, an item of chattel rather than a person with human dignity, became a well entrenched doctrine in American society. Even when the abolitionists were most vociferous in their insistance upon eliminating slavery in the United States (some two hundred years after the initial imporation of Negro slaves) they were not disputing the thought that the Negro was genetically inferior to the white man, but simply insisting that slavery was an immoral institution even if those held in bondage were inferior individuals.

The doctrine of genetic inferiority of the Negro was a widely held view and was responsible for many of the laws that created separate black and white communities after Emancipation. In fact, it was not until the 1954 Supreme Court decision concerning segregation in the public schools that the institutional tradition of regarding the Negro as genetically inferior was legally replaced by the notion that the Negro was not genetically inferior but rather that his behavior was pathological in the social sense, due to the history of slavery in this country.

The replacement of the genetic inferiority theory with the social pathology theory encouraged a great deal of research in the social sciences which was interested in describing Negro behavior in terms of how it

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deviated from the white norm. Thus an entire body of literature has been created that describes the Negro, not as he is, but in terms of how he is or is not conforming to the modes of behavior that the white man has established as normative and appropriate. This body of knowledge (or, to look at it another way, this body of misunderstanding) might be termed, the "myth of the Negro present."[1]

As Pernard (1966) has indicated, the use of white control groups to describe who the Negro is, actually results in "studies of the white population with emphasis on Negro or non-white data as representing deviance from a white norm." This unhappy state of affairs has led the social sciences to create a picture of the Negro as a "sick white man." A man for whom we, the white society, should feel great compassion and no little amount of guilt for we have infected him with his current "disease", but a man who nevertheless, no matter the reason why, is ill.

This mythical illness can be easily identified with a brief glance at the "professional literature." There are several prominent symptoms that are continuously diagnosed -- disintegration or "lack of" family structure (Moynihan, 1965, Schiefelbusch, 1967), poor motivation (Katz, 1967), inability to delay gratification, (Klaus and Gray, 1968) and underdeveloped language and cognitive abilities (Deutsch, 1965; John, 1963; Bereiter and Engelmann, 1966; Klaus and Gray, 1968). All these alleged symptoms need to be examined more closely, but for today I shall focus my attention on the premises operating in research on language and cognitive assessment of the

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[1]An obvious tribute to Herskovits' Myth of the Negro Past (1941) in which similar misunderstanding about the individual background of Afro-Americans was dealt with.

Negro. The kinds of research assumptions that are present in the literature concerning language can also be found in regard to the myths about family structure, motivation, etc.

When reviewing the literature one finds three major professions concerned with describing the language and cognitive abilities of black children: educators, psychologists (mainly child development types) and linguists. The educators were the first to contribute a statement about the language difficulties of these children -- a statement that amounted to the fact that these children were virtually verbally destitute -- i.e. they couldn't talk and if they did, it was deviant speech, filled with "errors." The next group to get into the foray -- the psychologists -- reconfirmed initially that the children didn't talk, and then added the sophisticated wrinkle that if they did talk, their speech was such that it was a deterrent to cognitive growth. The last group to come into the picture were the linguists who though thoroughly impressed with the sophisticated research of the psychologist, were astonished at the naivety of his pronouncements concerning language. The linguist began to examine the language of black children and brought us to our current conceptions of the language abilities of these children -- i.e. that they speak a well ordered, highly structured, highly developed language system which in many aspects is different from standard English.

We have a fascinating situation here where three professions are assessing the same behavior -- the child's oral language production and comprehension -- but with varying assumptions so that they see different things. However, it is not merely another example of the parable of the six blind men describing the elephant and asseting an elephant equalled that portion of the elephant that the blind man happened to be touching -- for in the parable all men were partially correct, and an elephant could be ad-

equately described in the sum total of their "observations." But when we look at the assumptions of the educator, the psychologist and the linguist, we find that there are actually some premises held by one profession -- e.g. the psychologists' view that a language system could be underdeveloped--that another profession sees as completely untenable -- linguists hold such a view of language as so absurd as to make them feel that nobody could possibly believe it and therefore for the linguist to refute it would be a great waste of time. The educator worked under the assumption that there is a single correct way of speaking and that everyone who does not speak in this "grammar book" fashion is in error -- (indeed, although the psychologist may not recognize it, he tacitly adheres to this principle when he defines language development in terms of "correct" standard English usage) -- this assumption is also untenable to the linguist who is interested in the structure and function of an utterance. To him the discussion of a hierarchical system that says a double negative -- i.e. they don' have none is inferior to a single negative -- i.e. they haven't any -- is meaningless. The linguist simply wishes to describe the rules of the system that allow a speaker of that system to generate a negative utterance -- or any other complex structure -- that is considered grammatical and is understood as intended, by the speakers of the system.

Let me briefly review the linguistic research on the assessment of language abilities of Negro children and then look back at the assumptions of the psychologist which led him astray and allowed him to build an elaborate, mythological body of literature concerning the linguistic incompetence of black children.

The linguist takes as basic that all humans develop language -- afterall,

there is no reason to assume that black African bush children develop a language and black inner city Harlem children do not! Subsumbed under this is that the language is a well ordered system with a predictable sound pattern, grammatical structure and vocabulary (in this sense, there are no "primitive" languages). The linguist assumes that any verbal system used by a community that fulfills the above requirements is a language and that no language is structurally better than any other language -- i.e. French is not better than German, Yiddish is not better than Gaelic, Oxford English is not better than standard English, etc. The second assumption of the linguist is that children learn language in the context of their environment -- that is to say, that a French child learns French not because his father is in the home or his mother reads him books, but because that is the language that he hears continually from whatever source and that is the language that individuals in his environment respond to. The third assumption that the linguist works with is that by the time a child is five he has developed language -- he has learned the rules of his linguistic environment.

What are those rules and how have they been determined? By using ghetto informants, linguists such as Stewart (1964, 1965, 1967, 1968), Dillard (1965, 1967), Bailey (1965, 1968), Labov (1967a, 1967b), and Shuy, Wolfram and Riley (1967) have described some of the linguistic parameters of Negro non-standard English. Differences between standard English and Negro non-standard occur to varying degrees in regard to the sound system, grammar and vocabulary.

Although Negro non-standard has many similar phonemes to those of standard English the distribution of these phonemes varies from standard English. For example /ɪ/ and /ɛ/ may not be distinguished before nasals, so that a "pin" in Negro non-standard may be either an instrument for writing a letter or something one used to fasten a baby's diaper. Sounds such as 'r' and 'l' are distributed so that 'cat' may mean that orange vegetable

that one puts in salads -- standard English carrot -- as well as, the four legged fuzzy animal, or a "big black dude." The reduction of /l/ and /r/ in many positions may create such homonyms as "toe" meaning a digit on the foot, or the church bell sound -- standard English toll. Final clusters are reduced in Negro non-standard so that "bowl" is used to describe either a vessel for cereal or a very brave soldier -- standard English bold.

These are but a few of the many instances where Negro non-standard sound usage differs from standard English. It is no wonder then, that Cynthia Deutsch (1964) should find in her assessment of auditory discrimination that disadvantaged black children did not "discriminate" as well as white children from middle class linguistic environments. She administered a discrimination task that equated "correct responses" with judgements of equivalences and differences in standard English sound usage. Many of her stimuli though different to the standard English speaker, i.e. pin-pen, are similar to the Negro non-standard speaker. She attributed the difference in performance of disadvantaged children to such things as the constant blare of the TV in their homes and there being so much "noise" in their environment that the children tended to "tune out." However, black children make responses based on the kind of language they consider appropriate. In the same way that cot - for sleeping, caught - for ensnared, or marry - to wed, Mary - the girl, and merry - to be happy are not distinguished in the speech of many white people (so that they would say on an auditory discrimination test that cot and caught were the same) - pin and pen are the same in the language of ghetto blacks. The responses that the black child makes are on the basis of the sound usage that he has learned in his social and geographical milieu, and do not reflect some difficulty discriminating -- just watch how fast he picks out the scamper of a rat from the "noise" in his environment!

The syntax of low income Negro children also differs from standard English in many ways (unfortunately the psychologist, not knowing the rules of Negro non-standard has interpreted these differences not as the result of well learned rules, but as evidence of "linguistic underdevelopment!). Some examples of the differences are provided below:

1. When you have a numerical quantifier such as 2, 7, 50, etc. you don't have to add the obligatory morphemes for the plural - e.g. 50 cent, 2 foot.

2. The use of the possessive marker is different. For example, the standard English speaker says "John's cousin"; the non-standard Negro speaker says John cousin. The possessive is marked here by the contiguous relationship of John and cousin.

3. Conditional is expressed by word order change rather than by "if". Standard English -- "I asked if he wanted to go." Negro non-standard -- I asks do he want to go.

4. The third person singular has no obligatory morphological ending in non-standard so that "she works here" is expressed as she work here in Negro non-standard.

5. Verb agreement differs so that one says she have a bike, they was going.

6. The use of the copula is not obligatory -- I going, he a bad boy.

7. The rules for negation are different. The double negative is used. Standard English "I don't have any" becomes I don' got none in Negro non-standard.

8. The use of ain't in expression of the past -- Negro non-standard present tense is he don't go, past tense is he ain't go.

9. The use of the "be" to express habitual action -- he working right now as contrasted with he be working everyday.

These are but a few examples of the rules that the non-standard speaker employs to produce utterances that are grammatical to other speakers in his environment.

Baratz and Povich (1967) assessed the language development of a group of five year old black Head Start children. They analyzed speech responses to photographs and to CAT cards using Lee's (1966) developmental sentence types model. A comparison of their data and Menyuk's (1964) restricted and transformational types of white middle class children was performed. Results indicated that the Negro Head Start child is not delayed in language acquisition -- the majority of his utterances are on the kernal and transformational levels of Lee's developmental model. His transformational utterances are similar to those described above -- he has learned the many complicated structures of Negro non-standard English.

But how has the psychologist assessed language abilities of Negro children that led him to conclude erroneously that the black child has an insufficient or underdeveloped linguistic system? The psychologist's basic problem was his assumption that to develop language was synonymous with the development of his own form of standard English. Therefore, he concluded that if black children do not speak like white children they are deficient in language development. His measures of "language development" were measures based on standard English (Bereiter, 1965; Thomas, 1962; Deutsch, 1964; Klaus and Gray, 1968). The illogical aspects of the psychologists' assumptions are evident if one realizes that using their criteria for "language development" one would have to say that a French child of five was linguistically underdeveloped because he did not speak standard English! Clearly in future assessment procedures the psychologist must distinguish between the questions: 1) has this child acquired language? and 2) has this child acquired competence in standard English? Only then can he make valid statements about the black

child's linguistic abilities.

But what other faulty notions does the psychologist appear to be using in relation to assessment of language and cognitive ability of black children? Perhaps one of the most blatant errors of many researchers has been a confusion between hypotheses concerning language and ones concerning cognition. For this reason, superficial differences in language structures and language styles have been taken as manifestations of underlying differences in cognitive ability. For example, Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) hold as one of the cardinal cognitive needs of the child the learning of conditionality as measured by the use of "if" constructions. They assume that the absence of "if" by a child indicates an instance in which the concept of conditionality is absent. However, Stewart and other linguists have described the fact that in some non-standard dialects of English such as Negro non-standard, conditionality may be expressed by the use of a word order inversion rather than with the vocabulary item "if". Thus, conditionality is expressed in the statement I aks Alvin did he want to go by changing he plus verb to did he plus verb, even though in standard English the same kind of conditionality would be expressed with "if" -- e.g. "I asked Alvin if he wanted to go."

Different usages of vocabulary items may lead to confusion on the part of the examiner so that he feels the child is lacking in a particular concept. For example, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test has an item that asks children to identify "building"; the correct response being the picture of men constructing an edifice. However, in Negro non-standard vernacular "building" is used only as a noun (one makes an edifice) so that the child will not respond to that item in the expected way. (There are other aspects about the PPVT which are culturally biased against the black child.)

The literature on cognitive abilities of black children comes mainly

from two sources. One is the attempt of many child psychologists to adopt Basil Bernstein's postulates on differences in language styles between lower and middle class English speakers, and to concretize these hypotheses into categories of language behavior that directly imply restrictions in cognitive ability. Interesting as are Bernstein's ideas about language style differences of various socio-economic groups, the relationship of particular linguistic usages on the one hand, and conceptual ability on the other, has yet to be determined. In fact, the preceding case of the confusion of the concept of conditionality with the presence or absence of the word "if" is an illustration of how misled one can become when relating specific speech forms with cognitive processes.

The second problem with the cognitive assessment literature is that there has been a tendency to take Piaget's cognitive development formulations as a total definition of cognition, and to equate cognition with rationality. As Greenfield and Bruner (1966) have pointed out concerning cross-cultural studies of Piagetian psychology (in which I believe we can include the American studies with black ghetto children) the main effect has been to depict developmental lag through a tacit acceptance of white control group norms. Bruner et al (1966) have several illustrations of cases where the experimenters recognition of cultural differences affected the child's abilities to perform the task. In one instance involving a conservative task, the child was asked "why do you say they are different?" He could not answer the question. Then it was discovered that the use of "do you say", though grammatically correct, was inappropriate to that culture. When the child was asked instead, "why are they different?" he answered the question immediately. The psychologist must take cultural differences of black ghetto children into con-

sideration in the course of his assessment of their cognitive ability.

The last assumption of the psychologist that I wish to deal with briefly is the widespread notion that "some environments are better than others for stimulating general language and cognitive growth (Deutsch and Deutsch, 1968). This assumption is, I believe, an attempt to deal with the pyschologist's confusion of language development and the acquisition of standard English which were discussed earlier. His confusion causes him to think he must explain a "language deficit." According to these researchers, one set of factors that is most detrimental for language and cognitive development involves the "inadequacies" of the ghetto mothering patterns in that:

1) The ghetto mother is so taken up with survival -- "subsistence behaviors" -- that she is too exhausted to talk to her children. Such a notion tells us more about the psychologist's lack of knowledge about the ghetto mother than it does about her actual role. It also assumes that there is a minimal amount of language that must be present for language to be learned and that Negro mothers don't give this to their children. Subsumed under this is the notion that language is only learned from one's mother (and that of course, can only be transmitted when there is a father in the home!). Also underlying such statements about the mother's role is the assumption that she is verbally immature (Raph, 1967) -- i.e. the language learned from her is underdeveloped.

2) It is presumed that the mother of a black child does not know how to stimulate or reinforce her child so that learning can occur. Subsumed under that assumption is the idea that such things as reading a book and singing to a child are essential behaviors for language to develop. The discussions on the inadequate reinforcements of verbal behavior on the part of the ghetto mother presumes that she encourages "passive, withdrawn

behavior in her children" (Schiefelbusch, 1967) and that verbal ability is not highly valued in the ghetto community. One need only to look at the anthropological literature concerned with language behavior to find dozens of attestations of the importance of verbal skills -- "rapping, playing the dozens, signifying, etc." to the ghetto community. (Hannerz, 1968; Newman, 1968; Abrahams, 1958; Koch, 1967).

It appears as if the assumptions that the psychologist uses in assessing language and cognitive skills of the black ghetto community have evolved because of misconceptions of what language is and how it functions. He has constructed elaborate ecological and psychological explanations of differences in language behavior which can be understood much more simply in terms of how linguistic and cultural systems operate. The assumptions have been used "after the fact" to erroneously explain data -- the assumptions themselves have no observational/experimental base.

Clearly what the psychologist needs is some sense of the ghetto child's culture -- how he organizes his world, what his language system is, what his learning patterns are, how they are similar to those of children in middle class white cultures, how they are different and how these differences interfere with the child's learning in a society that uses white cognitive styles and linguistic patterns as a basis for instruction and assessment of ability.

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